

## Against the Grain

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# International Dateline -- A Moral Witness Will King 1886-1950: The Diaries (1918-1927) of an Antiquarian Bookseller, Book-reading Man, Quaker and Poet

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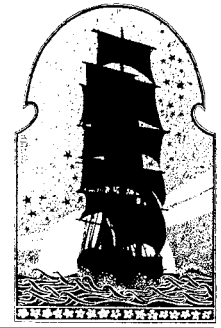
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# International Dateline — A Moral Witness Will King 1886 – 1950



## The Dairies (1918-1927) of An Antiquarian Bookseller, Book-reading Man, Quaker and Poet<sup>1</sup>

by **Rita Ricketts** (Blackwell's Historian and Bodleian Visiting Scholar, Author *Adventurers All, Tales of Blackwellians, of Books, Bookmen and Reading and Writing Folk*) <Rita.Ricketts@bodleian.ox.ac.uk>

One of the happy outcomes of working on the **Blackwell History Project** has been the chance, afforded by the generosity of the **Bodleian and Merton College Libraries**, to lodge the archives permanently. Thus safeguarded, they are there henceforth to plunder. Among the papers the first diary (1918-27) of the autodidact **William (Rex) King**, poet, Quaker, and **Blackwell** antiquarian bookseller, stands out; another volume started in 1939 has not yet rematerialized.<sup>2</sup> The material available in the diary makes a useful micro contribution to the current study of the History of the Book at Oxford. And its value was noted almost fifty years ago in a letter written by **Hugo Dyson**, bibliophile and Emeritus tutor in English Literature at **Merton College**, to **Basil Blackwell**.<sup>3</sup> **Dyson** writes that “the nearest in spiritual quality to his journal would perhaps – do you agree? – be **Edwin Muir's** Autobiography... a sceptical intelligence in some respects, impatient of sham and show, and a faithful spirit... He touches life at so many points: the essential solitude of the human condition; the unquenchable desire for knowledge and the freedom knowledge confers; some of the traditional kindly earnestness of the way of The Friends; the labour and fascination of the trade in old books; an examen of the state of English culture circa 1910-60.” **Dyson** sees **Rex** (as he was known) as the epitome of scholarship at the *university of life*: “he did not live in a world where the young are paid and begged to read and think and talk and study, but in a world in which you had to pay for and earn all your privileges... If some paid in false coin **Rex** was not one. For him the whole working world was a great university: he was lucky to find himself in one of the better colleges — the one called **Blackwell's**.”

Of particular interest to any bibliophile, must be the record **Rex** kept of the books he read and studied. It was this “zest for reading” that had brought **Rex** to the attention of the **Blackwells**, early in the second decade of the twentieth century. At the time **Benjamin Henry Blackwell**, founder of the **Broad Street Shop**, was a member of Oxford City Council; appropriately enough sitting on the committee of the Library which *his* father (**Benjamin Harris Blackwell**) had helped to found. **Basil** recorded the story as reported to him by his father:

“At one of the meetings there was read a letter written with sly humour offering for the acceptance of the Library a considerable collection of standard works in the field of English Literature ‘in case frequenters of the Library should still have an itch to read something after exhausting the popular papers on which apparently the Library grant was mainly expended.’ The signature was **W. King**. My Father scrutinized the books and found them to be ‘a poor man’s library judiciously chosen, well used, and well kept — the result of many previous sixpences hardly come by.’ He sought out the donor and found him to be a clerk who had fallen out of employment by the G.P.O., through long illnesses, and was recovering from a period of almost desperate poverty. In conversation he revealed a mind so stored with reading, so acute in literary judgment, altogether so manifestly the mind of a born bookman, that my Father invited him to come and work in the Secondhand and Antiquarian Department of

the Bookshop. There his knowledge had scope and his personality impressed itself on all who dealt with him, staff and customers alike. It seemed that he could assess the value of a book by holding it in his hands. Touch his mind at any point, and he responded instantly with literary allusions, shrewd criticism, apt folk-saying, or original aphorism vividly phrased and presented with the somewhat wry humour of his native Gloucestershire.”

**Will King** was born near Cirencester, some 35 miles from Oxford. **Basil Blackwell** described his origins “of plain peasant stock, the son of a baker who peddled cakes at County fairs.” **Rex, Basil** tells us, “was of middle height and slender build; he had a fine head with a profile reminiscent of **Henry Fielding's** save that **Rex** showed signs of suffering and meditation.” Like **Benjamin Henry** his new Master at **Blackwell's**, who had leant Latin and Literature on daily runs around Christ Church meadows, **Rex** was self-educated. As soon as he was able, he had walked backwards and forwards to Cirencester to consult a shop ‘which dealt in used books.’ There he spent many hours reading and choosing for his collection such volumes as his few pence could purchase.” Recovering from the illness that had left him unemployed, **Rex** came to **Blackwell's** where, **Basil** tells us, “he was as happy as a difficult home-life with a Xantippe and two discordant children would permit.” **Basil** observed that his marriage had been a case of “the nymph pursuing the faun pursued,” and “the nymph, under the stress of hard times and a jealousy of **Rex's** intellectual and spiritual prestige among the Quaker community, became a scold. Escaping each day to **Blackwell's**, he walked and talked with scholars and men of letters (he was an authority on **Coleridge**.)” But at the close of the day, **Basil** recorded, he returned “to something like a penitentiary which, as the years passed and his wife’s health declined, became increasingly exacting. His loyalty nevertheless was undeviating. Occasionally he would confide in me, but I never knew him to betray the stern principles, stoic and Christian, in which he had schooled himself.”

Subject as **Rex** was to Theages’ Bridle, **Basil** found his strength of character all the more remarkable: his “spiritual strength was his reaction to physical frailty.”

“His speech,” **Basil** wrote, “was spiced with the sly ironical humour which is typical of Gloster folk, and instances from the store of his vast reading... Only once I had him at a loss, when I quoted ‘Give him Long Melford,’ but I had to yield to him the palm for reading with enjoyment *Sartor Resartus*, which after several attempts remains for me but musty fodder.”<sup>4</sup> Toward the end of his life he honoured me increasingly with his confidence. I wish **Rex** had recorded, or that I might record as he told it to me, a hideous experience in his boyhood. His father, a small confectioner, used to visit fairs and other gatherings offering for sale his buns and cakes (young **Rex** and his brother would be paid 1d. a 100 for trimming currants of their stalks). From one such fair or fete champetre at Chedworth, perhaps, or Fosse Cross, little **Rex** was dispatched home by train to Cirencester as the evening came on. He was alone in

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a compartment until a horrible fellow blind drunk and raving tumbled in as the train started. He saw the boy **Rex** and with threats to rip him open and tear out his guts made a lurch at him. **Rex** contrived to wriggle under the seat, where he listened to ogre-like threats and curses, and watched the brute's hand and foot as he fumbled about in dazed search for his victim. He managed to escape at the next station, but the fearful memory was still vivid as he spoke of it some fifty years later."

Little of **Rex's** early trials are revealed in his diary. Nonetheless, for **Basil Blackwell** it reveals "the constancy of an austere spirit loyal to the Quaker discipline and to that of Marcus Aurelius — the spirit of one stretched upon the 'rack of this tough world,' but in whom there was 'no shadow of turning.'" Yet the diary, and **Rex's** other writings, has also a lightness of touch, deeply personal and resonant, revealing the ups and downs of married and family life and of long days at the shop. Barely an entry, however mundane the subject matter, is left without food for thought. His first diary entry, on Whit. Sunday, 19 May 1918, finds **Rex** in full flood. He speculates on the nature of truth, love, and war, wrestles with a Chestertonian paradox, reports on his reading of the Letters and Journals of **Caroline Fox**, and after tea, he takes his family for a saunter through the meadows: "one dazzling cloth of buttercup-gold, shimmering in the declining sun. The hawthorn hedges one mass of blossom, as though burdened with a sudden fall of snow. God never loses his ecstasy in the renewal of spring." On the same day he attends the Friend's Meeting, to enjoy "a quiet season of refreshment." He values, above all, this "open ministry of the Friends" where the "expression of extravagant and ill-digested opinions — is of great value in so far as it creates a charitable atmosphere in which these views may be dispassionately judged. One is able in this way to disclose oftentimes a vein of truth in the crudest utterance."

**Rex** gives an example of such "a truth" as the entry continues: "...at this morning's gathering one speaker endeavoured to prove that the great European catastrophe was not the result of hatred, but of love — love that is of the different peoples for their own native land. Stated in this bald way it appears an absurdity: quite a Chestertonian paradox. It is in fact one of those partial truths which is more difficult to scotch than pure error. The fallacy arises in the comprehensive meaning of the word *love* — which may be used with a dozen different significations. It is evident that a *love* which leads to a long nightmare of mutual murder and unparalleled slaughter is not the *love* of which **Paul** gives a minute spectrum analysis in 1607 xiii... Another speaker gave an inspiring exposition of the blessings of those that make the most High their habitation. A man who is conscious of the encompassing presence of God will live in a mountain top atmosphere of calm. Exterior circumstances and conditions will have even less and less power to influence and unsettle his mind. One might even imagine that a vivid, persisting awareness of this encompassing presence — this divine aura in which we live, move, and have our being — would act as a shield against the germs of contagious disease."

By the next day, Whit. Monday, May 20, 1918, **Rex** is already exhausting his readers:

"A perfect holiday, the joyous earth bathed in brilliant sunshine, and cooled by caressing breezes. The children and I had a very enjoyable climb to Shotover, where after basking lazily in the deep grass, we gathered two armfuls of blue bells; and then sat down again — the children amusing themselves in the making of daisy chains. What a wealth of innocent and costless pleasure is open to the childlike heart. In the afternoon, I read the earlier part of **Delolme** *On the Constitution* — quite a readable résumé of England's constitutional development, but one of legal phraseology. Read also a few pages of **Fox's** journal — a book full of energy and rugged sincerity. How bracing and purgative is the salt of his utterance. And I went to Chesterfield, where one Britland was priest. He saw beyond the common sort of priests, for he had been partly convinced, and had spoken much on behalf of truth, before he was priest there; but when the priest of that town died, he got the parsonage, and choked himself with it... This gift of rural, picturesque speech belongs to all those who pierce the veil of convention and reach the bedrock of reality. How often does it flash from the pages of **Thoreau**. How many a poor immortal soul have I met well

nigh crushed and smothered under its load, creeping down the road of life, pushing before it a barn seventy five feet by forty, its Aegean stables never cleansed, and one hundred acres of land, tillage, mowing, pasture, and woodlot!...

When I read of **Fox** walking shoeless through the streets of Lichfield, in the depths, in the depths of winter, crying out *Woe to the bloody city of Lichfield* ... immediately jumped into my mind **Ezekiel** the prophet, who on so many occasions performed apparently foolish and grotesque actions at the behest of God. A striking parallel might be drawn between the experiences of these two God intoxicated men. After his mission was accomplished, **Fox** continues:

"But the fire of the Lord was so in my feet, and all over me, that I did not matter to put on my shoes any more, and was at a stand whether I should or not, till I fell freedom from the Lord so to do." This same indifference to physical conditions is revealed a few pages farther on: "After the Lord had this discovered her deceit and perverseness, I walked out of the house and went away till I came to a slack of hay, and lay in the haystack that night in rain and snow, it being but three days before the time called Christmas." The reader can scarce pause for breath before **Rex**, "after tea" is busy "fingered idling in the garden" only to fit in "a little translation from the Spanish" before he goes to bed. The next day, Tuesday, 21 May, he is up bright and early, reads **Asensi** before going to work where he waited on **Mr. Asquith**, and returns home well after 8.00 pm. Admitting to exhaustion, he is still ready for a glimpse at an essay on Tennyson:

"Rose at 6.30 am; another brilliant morning. Read a few pages of **Asensi's** *El Aeronauta*. Found an accumulation of orders at business, after the holiday: but finished up fairly comfortable at 8 o'clock. Had the pleasure of waiting upon **Mr. Asquith** — the Ex-Prime Minister in the afternoon... After supper, being too exhausted to enjoy any amount of reading, I glanced through an essay on Tennyson by **Paul Elmer More**, the transatlantic critic. He finds the two outstanding weaknesses of Tennyson in his 'prettiness' and the spirit of compromise that mars some of his most quoted work. This latter blemish he illustrates with a stanza of *In Memoriam*, which describes the reception of the poet's dead friend into the heavenly host:

*The great intelligence fair  
That range above our mortal state,  
In circle round the blessed gate,  
Received and gave him welcome there.  
Now turn to Milton's Lycidas:  
There entertain him all the saints above  
In solemn troops, and sweet societies,  
That sing, and singing, in their glory move,  
And wipe the tears for ever from his eyes.*

Why is it that Tennyson, he asks, leaves us so cold, whereas at the sound of **Milton's** words the heart still leaps as at a bugle call? To these *flies in the ointment*, I would

add the sense of conscious artistry and wordcraftsmanship that one feels in many of his best lines. He does not always achieve the level of the art that conceals art."

Perhaps, given limited space, a look at **Rex's** diary entries for the summer of 1918-19 is near to our own experience of the vagaries of the weather and the continuing war in Afghanistan. Perhaps we may mentally compare our own bedside reading with **Rex's**?

#### Saturday, June 1, 1918

"June opened with royal splendour this morning. A swarm of bees settled on Broad St. a few yards from the shop, and were successfully taken by some enterprising individual, who calmly flicked them into a cardboard box with a feather. The news this morning was of a serious character, and many wonder if **Foch's** *army of manoeuvre* is not more or less of a myth. It is certain that the French are almost at the end of their resources — after four years of unparalleled fighting, and with a population that has been dwindling for many years. How terrible to think of the **Kaiser's** life-long crusade for large families — now that the fiendish end of this gospel of procreation is made clear on the grim

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battlefields of Europe! **Mr. Presley** was passed into Grade III at his medical examination this afternoon; and is thus liable to be called up for service in fifteen days... The evening news was of a more re-assuring character, and the defence appears to have settled down into some degree of stability. Continued my reading of *The Essays on Shakespeare*."

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### Sunday, June 2

"At the Meeting this morning my mind was exercised as to the **nature of faith**. Faith is not a mere intellectual assent to a creedal statement, or belief in any formulated scheme of salvation, or the adoption of a ceremonial cult. Men of a creed are all too plentiful, but men of faith are difficult to find. To have faith is to have such a deep-rooted assurance of the reality of God and the eternal realities that it affects one's whole outlook and activities. One's faith consists only in those things which determine one's conduct and one's valuations of life. To say that we have faith in the unseen, and then act as though our vision was limited by the worldly and material, is to give a lie to our affirmation. The man of faith launches out adventurously on the current of his deepest intuitions — not hugging the shores of personal comfort, nor veering with the wind to compromise with the conventions and usages of his time. The world and its honours are counted as dust in the balance... My thoughts were afterwards developed in striking fashion by **Dr. Gillet**...

I regret that I do not take altogether kindly to the type of young man who frequent the Friend's meeting — although of course, I am included in that indictment. Despite the toughness of their consciences, they are in the bulk a pasty, effeminate, crotchety set. I must confess that those who in defiance of their religious traditions have donned the soldier's uniforms are of a much superior type to their queasy-conscienced brethren. At the same time, one would not belittle the courage of the genuine objector — whose ordeal of contumely and scorn is not one easily to be borne. I have never, however, been able to accept unreservedly the Quaker attitude towards war — much as I hate and condemn it. Although adhesion to some religious body may multiply one's opportunities of doing good, yet I hate the tyranny of a sect or an accepted body of beliefs. The only adequate bond for uniting a society is love. Why should we doff secondhand opinions!

Finished *The Essays on Shakespeare*. And found them much to my liking."

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### Monday, June 3

"The intense heat has been tempered today by a delightfully caressing breeze. Enjoyed an hour in the company of **Burns**, through the medium of his letters — these reveal his kindly tolerance, his sturdy commonsense, his poetical disdain of striving towards a set goal, and his delight in being able simply to poke his head into this wonderful universe. The letters written to his various patrons are not so pleasing as those written to more intimate friends. They are cold with a stilted meticulousness of style and sentiment, but under the smooth lines one can read the revulsion of a proud nature. Despite his repeated assurances to the contrary, I know **Mrs. Dunlop** — of the line of **Wallace** — must have been oftentimes a piece of glass-paper to his feelings."

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### Tuesday, June 4

"A busy, trying day at business — Took over **Mr. Hunt's** duties, and the new harness rubs a little for the time being. Moulded up a few potatoes in the evening; a few pages of **Burns**; and then to bed..."

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### Saturday, July 13, 1918

"On a light note is **Rex's** exhortation:

"O! Ye early Victorians! I saw this night that which would have shocked your respectable decorum! A buxom farm lass astride a man's bicycle, and carrying her lover upon the step behind! What a blow to **Mrs. Grundy**! An awful sight upon a Sunday!"

At the other end of the spectrum are examples of his despair at the horrors of war:

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### Saturday, August 3, 1918

"**Emily's** sister brought the sad news that **Elyah**, her youngest brother, was killed at the front last Saturday. Both legs shattered, and only regained consciousness long enough to give his home address... Mother sent news that **Maggie** had given birth to a strong, healthy daughter. Thus we get the whole cycle of birth and death in one day..."

The sight of a poor Australian youth — once, no doubt, sane and strong — gibbering and moping like a brainless ape in the High St has brought home to me the horrors of war and of its eternal devilishness more powerfully than the hundreds of crippled men about the streets."

By the autumn **Rex** has cheerier news:

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### Sunday, October 13, 1918

"A bright autumn day after a precession of dreary ones. Everyone cheered by the news that Germany has virtually surrendered to the Allies and has accepted **President Wilson's** Fifteen Points. I trust that the new world order that will arise from the blood and chaos of this terrible war will be worthy of its great cost. As **Mrs. Gillett** pointed out at the meeting this morning, it behoves us all to do our part in influencing aright the thought of the nation at this time. There are still many nations that openly flout the idea of a League of Nations and one thundering for a meaningful tariff and a boycott of enemy countries. God grant that the noise they make is in no wise commensurate with their insolence."

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### Sunday, November 10

"The Kaiser has at last abdicated, and the Crown Prince has renounced his succession

to the throne. Read a few reviews by **Edwin P. Whipple** — an American critic of the mid Victorian era... his essays on **Macaulay** have much of the rigor and effectiveness of **Macaulay** himself. He hails **G. P. R. James** in an unmerciful fashion..."

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### Monday, November 11, 1918

"The armistice terms have been accepted by Germany, and the historic document was signed this morning at 5a.m. Firing on all fronts ceased at 11 o'clock — being the 11th hour of the 11th day of the eleventh month. Within a few minutes of the arrival of the glorious news, Oxford was in a wild ferment of excitement. Flags and noisy bands of youths and soldiers paraded the streets making a dreadful din with rattles, hooters, sticks and pans etc... The children walked down to Oxford to see the revelry and rejoicing, and arrived back about six o'clock tired, and wet through to the skin. Poor Weasel had a sound smacking "to set up his circulation," and was sent ignominiously to bed — surely a sorry ending to so memorable a day! A small band of Serbian students marched through the town about 8 o'clock singing with wonderfully impressive effect their national songs. A persistent drizzling rain dampened down any tendency towards mafficking."

By winter, as momentous events are unfolding, **Rex** is wrestling with his conscience:

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### Sunday, December 15, 1918

"The gloom of the weather — its gusts, its storm, and its depression — have been mirrored in my own inner world of thought and feeling during the past week. On Friday — being the faithful thirteenth of the month — I had an offer from a local bookshop, which from the monetary point of view — and in the number of hours — was a great improvement upon my present condition. On the other hand, I have always experienced friendliness and consideration from **Mr. Blackwell**, and I know that to leave them at this particular juncture of affairs would cause him considerable inconvenience. At the same time, it is no use blunting the fact that my present wage is not sufficient 'to carry on' in these iron

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## International Dateline from page 80

times... and a rise of £60 was not to be winked at! Then too, when the fellows return from the army, they may regard me as having climbed into power and position over their backs. These and a hundred and one other considerations kept my mind in a perpetual ferment. At last, through the good offices of **Mr. Hanks**, I obtained a talk with **Mr. Blackwell**, who with characteristic tact and kindness brushed away the baseless fabric of my fears."

**Rex** did remain at **Blackwell's** for the rest of his life, and his love and respect for both **Benjamin Henry** and then his son, **Sir Basil** as he became, did not diminish. At his death, in October 1950, **Basil** wrote the following note for his staff: "Early in the year it was manifest that **Will King's** health (always frail) was failing fast. We did all we could to lighten his duties at Broad Street, leaving him free to come and go as he pleased, and later giving him the status of consultant; but we were not able to aid him in the inexorable routine of his home. As his strength waned, his wife's illness made increasing claims upon it; nevertheless, he spared himself no part of his duty, as he understood it (for loyalty was of the essence of his nature), and, sustained by some power which he could only ascribe to 'a miracle of the Grace of God,' ran his straight race to its merciless end. From time to time he honoured me with his confidence, and during his last weeks at home I had several talks with him on terms of simple friendship, though most, I think, was said, as formerly, in the clasping of hands. Anyone who knew of or worked with him must be aware that we have lost something irreplaceable in his mastery of his calling, and the knowledge and judgment which he drew from the store of his vast reading. But this is not all. As I reflect upon the witness of his life and conversation, and upon the meditations recorded in his journals, a question insistently presents itself to me (I write with no sense of exaggeration): have we at **Blackwell's** these thirty-four years entertained at unawares one who may deserve the tremendous title of Saint?"<sup>5</sup> And **Rex's** famous writings, that "showed the whole working world was a great university," were, by his own admission, used by **Basil** to write his many notes and speeches.

The next installment compliments **Rex's** stories with those of other **Blackwell** apprentices, notably **Fred Hanks** whose long service at **Blackwell's** was rewarded with an Honorary Degree of MA from **Oxford University**. 🌿

### Endnotes

1. This work will form part of a contribution to *An Oxford Education: Blackwell's* "alternative seat of learning," which celebrates the life and work of the **Blackwell** family and their associates from many walks of life, their contributions to publishing, bookselling, to the 'commonwealth' of writers and readers both near and far, and to many and varied aspects of life in the City of Oxford. It will be published by the **Bodleian** in 2013-14 to commemorate the opening of the **Blackwell Hall** in the **Weston Library**, and in recognition of the gift by **Julian Blackwell** of the **Basil Blackwell** working library and the **Blackwell** publishing and bookselling archives to the **Bodleian** (Modern Papers and Printed Books and Ephemera) and **Merton College** (The Merton Blackwell Collection College). The editor and principal author is **Rita Ricketts**. It was also the subject of a paper to be given by **Rita Ricketts** at **Merton College**, 25 November 2010 as part of the Study of the History of the Book series: A Moral Witness.
2. **Basil Blackwell's** papers, Merton Blackwell Collection (MBC).
3. **H. V. D. Dyson** to **Basil Blackwell** 27.12.65, Merton Blackwell Collection (MBC).
4. **Thomas Carlyle's** major work, *Sartor Resartus* (meaning "The tailor re-tailored"), first published as a serial in 1833-34).
5. Broad Sheet, **Blackwell's** house journal, **MBC**.

## Rumors from page 76

Libraries have traditionally shunned textbooks but wonder what the future holds? [www.onle.wsj.com/](http://www.onle.wsj.com/) (need UN and PW)

*Against the Grain* / February 2011

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## Back Talk from page 86

play in preserving the scholarly record by giving away single terabytes of memory to departments across campus. This isn't heavy-handed control, just helpful. Such a policy is helped by the University being against the creation of new departmental server rooms.

**10. Mobile devices are becoming very big** but small treatments of serious topics are being sought. Having just got off a plane and having read the airline magazine in which there were advertisements for summarized books for the busy executive (it is amazing what one is willing to read when they are to turn their **Kindles** and **iPads** off), I thought maybe libraries should consider buying summarized books like the **Elements** and **Shorts** provided by **FT (Financial Times) Press** <http://www.ftpress.com/promotions/promotion.aspx?promo=137607>, books like the old tried and true, *Cliffs Notes* or even electronic versions of *Readers Digest Select Books*. Amazing how some old ideas in new clothes can be popular again.

I have to admit that I probably wouldn't take such good notes on these ideas except **Katina** makes me give the summary talk at the end of the conference. Having said that, I still maintain that the **Charles-ton Conference** is the best value for dollar when it comes to getting educated while having fun. 🌿

And in this issue, **Mark Herring** (p.65) talks about **Borders** and contrasts this with changes that **Barnes & Noble** has made to their operation. He suggests that libraries should do likewise. And, on the **ATG News Channel**, **Dennis Brunning** mourns **Borders'** demise. <http://www.against-the-grain.com/2011/03/atg-hot-topic-of-the-week-borders-bankrupt-some-borders-closing/>

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